THE LAST RIDE OF
PRAIRIE ROSE

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Prologue

Cassie Robbins-Lane adjusted the bronc rein again, feeling for that precise, unforgiving point between too slack and too tight. The leather bit into her gloved palm, steady and familiar, a lifeline coiled in her hand. She slid her weight in the saddle, testing her balance, feeling the creak of worn leather and the restless muscle shifting beneath her.

The palomino beneath her was all coiled spring and fury, golden hide twitching, white mane brushing the boards of the chute. Warm breath puffed against the steel as the horse shook its head, rattling the rigging, eager to explode into the blinding Wyoming sun. Cassie glanced down at the bronc, then up at the men braced on the rails—one at the gate latch, one at the horse's head, another steadying the flank. Their faces were set, practiced and calm, but their knuckles were white where they gripped wood and steel.

She lifted her chin and looked out, past the gate, into the vast bowl of the arena.

Cheyenne Frontier Days. The "Daddy of 'em All." The place where her great-grandmother, Prairie Rose Henderson—Ann Robbins to the family—had ridden into legend and then disappeared into rumor and mystery. Today, the stands were already roaring, dust hanging in the afternoon light like ghosts that refused to settle. Somewhere out there, beyond the chutes and banners, lay the truth Cassie had been chasing her whole life.

This was supposed to be about the ride, about the rhythm of spurs and shoulders and eight hard seconds. For everyone else, maybe it was. For Cassie, it had never just been about the sport. Every bronc she mounted, every rodeo town, every long drive under a sky full of stars had been another attempt to step into the shadow Prairie Rose left behind, to understand what really happened the day the stories stopped and the whispers began.

She closed her eyes for half a breath and, in the muffled roar of the crowd, thought she could hear her great-grandmother's voice as clear as if the old cowgirl were perched on the rail beside her.

Keep your feet forward, girl. Lift on that rein. Don't you let him take your seat. And don't you ever let them write your story for you.

“Are you ready, Cassie?” the chute boss called, leaning in so she could hear him over the noise.

Her heart kicked once, hard. This was it. Her last Cheyenne. Her last bronc. Her last chance to ride straight into the heart of the mystery that had chased her from one arena to the next.

“Yes!” Cassie answered, squeezing her legs against the bronc’s sides, feeling the animal bunch beneath her. She sat deep, spine tall, and wrapped her fingers tight around the rein. “Let’s do this.”

She gave the nod.

The gate flew open.
The horn sounded.
And Cassie Robbins-Lane went to meet whatever waited for her on the other side of eight seconds.

Chapter 1

As she lay in the dirt, the rodeo men came running.
“Are you okay?”
“Don’t move!”
“Get the medic!”

The voices blurred together, echoing around her as she stared up at the bright arena lights, dazed and unable to make her body respond.

When she finally came to, she was in the back of an ambulance, the world reduced to sirens, antiseptic, and the gentle sway of the road beneath her.

“W-w-what’s going on?” she muttered, tongue thick and clumsy.

“Don’t try to talk,” the medic said, resting a steady hand on her shoulder. “You took a pretty bad fall. Let’s get you to the hospital.”

Pulling up to UCHealth Memorial Hospital Central, the ambulance was met by a team of waiting staff who helped slide Cassie out and rush her into the trauma wing.

“The bronc slammed her into the ground,” the arena boss told the doctor as they rolled her inside. “We think she broke several ribs. One rib might have torn her lung—she’s having a hard time breathing.”

After three hours in surgery repairing the punctured lung and setting the rib that was out of place, Cassie was moved to recovery.

Laramie sat at her bedside, Cassie’s hand held gently in hers. She leaned over to brush a stray lock of hair from Cassie’s face. Cassie stirred and blinked awake.

“Laramie?” Cassie’s voice was rough and puzzled. She tried to sit up, then froze as a sharp pain cut through her chest.

“Don’t try to move, Cassie,” Laramie said softly, helping ease her back against the pillow. “You just got out of surgery. They patched up your lung and worked on your ribs.”

Cassie shifted her gaze to Laramie, blinking against the haze of pain meds.
“How bad is it?” she asked. “Really.”

Laramie hesitated, then squeezed her hand. “Bad enough you scared me to death.”

Cassie swallowed. “The standings, Lar. Where am I?”

“You were sitting third in the nation,” Laramie said. “Pike’s Peak was supposed to close the gap.”

“And now?”

Laramie looked away for a beat. “You turned in a no-score and you’re in a hospital bed instead of on the next horse. The others are still riding. Points don’t wait.”

“So that’s it,” Cassie whispered. “No shot at number one.”

“Not this season,” Laramie said gently. “You’re not losing your career, Cass. But the race for top bronc rider? That one’s gone.”

Cassie stared at the ceiling, fighting the sting in her eyes. “I was this close.”

“You still are,” Laramie said. “Just…maybe not in the way you thought. You’ve got more riding on you than a buckle now.”

“I’m going to miss Frontier Days,” Cassie said in despair.

“Who cares, Cass?” Laramie burst out. “All that matters is that you’re still with us.”

“With all the injuries Prairie Rose had, she never missed Cheyenne. That was my goal.” Cassie’s voice tightened. “She is the reason I’m doing all of this. Laramie, ever since Mom showed me the hope chest full of Ann’s things, I haven’t been able to let her go. There’s too much mystery. I need to know what happened.”

“You’re going to have plenty of time to dig into that while you heal up,” Laramie said, a wry smile tugging at her mouth.

Cassie couldn’t help it; she grinned back.

Chapter 2

The laptop sat open on the coffee table, manila folders spread beside her on the couch, and the photograph clutched firmly in her hand. Ann and her last husband, Charles Coleman, stood side by side on their ranch in the Green Mountains.

She turned the picture over and traced the date written on the back: June 1930.

The look on Ann's face wasn't happiness; it was hardship. Was she truly unhappy, or was this just one hard moment caught on film? Were she and Charles good for each other? Did he really love her?

So many questions, all trapped inside a single photograph.

Cassie set the picture down with care and pulled one of the manila folders into her lap. On the tab, in her mother's careful handwriting, were three words: ANN – 1930–31.

She flipped it open. Inside were brittle newspaper clippings, a couple of letters, and a yellowed envelope with a return address from Cheyenne. One headline caught her eye first, the black type slightly faded but still sharp enough to make her breath hitch.

"Frontier Days…" she murmured, skimming the line. Her heart started to beat a little faster.

Whatever had happened to Ann, whatever had turned that smile into something harder, the trail seemed to run straight through Cheyenne—and through the same arena Cassie had nearly died trying to reach.

The Cheyenne wind pushed dust in low, restless swirls across the Frontier Days grounds, whispering against the canvas of the big tents and the rough boards of the chutes. Prairie Rose Henderson—Ann Robbins to the men who wrote the contracts and counted the money—pulled her hat down tighter and squinted toward the arena.

Her name had been called not long ago, rolling out over the loudspeaker with the same easy confidence it always did, as if the years hadn't started to weigh on her shoulders and in her bones. The broncs were ranked this year, meaner than most, and she could feel it in the way the air thrummed every time one blew out of the chute.

Behind the bucking chutes, the noise was different from the grandstand roar—closer, sharper. Men shouted to one another, metal gates clanged, horses slammed against

steel and wood. Prairie Rose checked her rigging again, fingers quick and sure, though a faint tremor ran through her hand when no one was looking.

“Ann, you sure about this one?” a stock handler asked, nodding toward the bronc penned in for her. The horse was already sweating, hide quivering, eyes too bright.

“She’s just another horse,” Prairie Rose said, though she could feel something coiled and wrong in the air. “Cheyenne don’t wait on nerves.”

She stepped up onto the narrow rail, the boards creaking under her weight, and looked out toward the arena. Flags snapped in the wind. The announcer’s voice bled in and out around the edges of the chutes. Somewhere out there, a camera would catch whatever came next.

For one heartbeat, she let herself think of the Green Mountains, of Charles, of the quiet they’d promised each other when the rodeo days were finally done. Then the gate man called her name again, closer this time, impatient.

Prairie Rose swung down into the saddle. The bronc shifted, muscles bunching under her, the world shrinking to leather, rein, and the small square of sky above the chute.

“Ready when you are, Rose,” the chute boss said.

She took a breath, set her feet, and gave a single, sharp nod.

The gate blew open. The horse launched. And the gear gave way.

As Ann flew through the air, the crowd’s roar snapped into silence. When she finally hit the ground, the pickup men and arena crew were already halfway to her.

Rushed to the hospital in Cheyenne, Ann coughed up blood, each breath a struggle. Medics worked frantically over her, trying to keep her anchored to this world.

A week later, Ann left the hospital with scars that ran deeper than the stitches on her skin. Her gear had been tampered with.

“Her gear had been tampered with,” Cassie read aloud. “No one was ever charged. But they knew. Her rein was purposely cut so it would only give after enough pulling—right when the horse really started to buck. Who could have done it? Who would want Grammy Ann dead?”

She turned the page and froze on a black-and-white photo of a man in a suit, hat tipped just so: John Judd. The caption called him “husband number two—person of interest.” There was no more information about him in the rest of the clippings.

Cassie rifled through the other folders, but his name never appeared again.

Fine.

Reaching down for the laptop, she set it on her knees and opened a new search window. Her fingers hovered for a moment, then she typed in the name: John Judd.

Within seconds, a list of old articles and scattered references appeared on the screen. Somewhere in that mess, Cassie was sure, lay the missing pieces of what had really started that day in Cheyenne—back in that first wild, sunlit jump.

Chapter 3

“Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Union Pacific Railroad who has sponsored this year's event, it is our honor to announce to you the winner of the 1917 Ladies Bronc Riding Championship, Prairie Rose Henderson.” the announcer stated with excitement. The arena erupted in cheers from the crowd.

Accepting the gold and silver belt buckle, Rose and Johnny were on the platform. She turned waving to the crowd. Johnny’s arm was around her. They were so excited about the accolades.

The agent flicked ash from his cigarette and smiled across the table at Johnny.

“Johnny, you and Rose are sitting on a gold mine,” he said. “The public can’t get enough of the West right now. They want dust, horses, and real riders, not some studio cowboy who’s scared of his own saddle.”

Johnny leaned back. “We’ve been doing just fine on the circuit.”

“Sure you have,” the second agent jumped in. “But think bigger. Arizona’s where the new Westerns are being shot. Clear skies, red rock, wide open country. You give us a few months down there, we turn Prairie Rose into the face of this whole thing. Posters, newsreels, maybe even a feature picture. And you?” He pointed at Johnny. “You’re her leading man. Stunts, riding, maybe a few lines if you want them.”

Johnny’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t need stuntmen. You need names. Rose is a rodeo cowgirl. Hollywood doesn’t care about cowgirls unless you can put them in a dress.”

The first agent laughed softly. “That’s the beauty of it. We don’t want to change her too much. The trick is to make the audience believe you two are the real West—and you are. We just…shape the story a little. You move to Arizona for a spell, we put you up near the set, regular pay, more than you’ll see in a season of rodeos. No more worrying if the next bronc is going to break your neck just to pay for gas.”

Johnny glanced at Rose. “And what’s the catch?”

“No catch,” the second agent said smoothly. “You show up, you ride when we say ride, pose when we say pose. We get a few scenes of Rose doing what she does better than any man we’ve ever seen. You two smile for the cameras, sign a few contracts, and next

thing you know, every girl in the country wants to be Prairie Rose, and every boy wants to be you."

Rose folded her arms. "And if we say no?"

The first agent's smile thinned. "Then someone else becomes the face of the frontier. Some pretty actress who's never seen a real bronc in her life. The pictures get made either way. Seems a shame to leave all that glory—and all that money—on the table when it's got your names written all over it."

Johnny held Rose's gaze for a long moment. "Arizona, huh?"

"Arizona," the second agent said, already reaching for his briefcase. "Sunshine, moving pictures, and your names in lights. All you have to do is sign, pack up, and let us take it from there."

The heat hit them first. Arizona felt like someone had turned the sun up too high and forgotten to turn it back down. The studio bungalow was small and whitewashed, a far cry from the Green Mountains, but the agents called it "home" like they were doing Rose and Johnny a favor.

At first, it was almost fun. Rose rode for camera tests, loped a horse past painted saguaros, showed stunt men how to sit a saddle so they didn't look like city boys. Johnny doubled for actors in simple scenes, took a few fake punches in a saloon, and laughed it off when the director yelled cut.

But it all changed the day the director saw her ride for real. A bronc on the lot blew up harder than expected; Rose stuck it without thinking, muscle and instinct, eight seconds of pure rodeo in front of rolling cameras.

After that, everything was "Prairie Rose this" and "Prairie Rose that." Posters mocked up with her silhouette. Publicity stills of her in her wild outfits, plumes and fringe catching the sun. The studio wanted her name on the reels, her face in the newsreels, her smile on every lobby card. Johnny's name slid further down the call sheets, from "stunt rider" to "additional rider" to nothing at all.

The clock read 2:47 AM. Cassie's eyes burned. She hadn't showered, hadn't bothered changing out of her dusty ranch clothes—just collapsed into bed fully clothed and pulled the blanket over her head.

Sleep came like a stone dropping into water.

Prairie Rose rode first, her palomino's coat gleaming like burnished gold under the arena lights. The flag streamed behind her—crimson and brilliant against the darkness. The crowd roared, but the sound seemed distant, muffled, the way noise sounds underwater. This was the rodeo finals. This was everything.

Cassie stood in the chute, her hands wrapped around the leather rigging. The smell of horse sweat and dust filled her lungs. Her heart hammered against her ribs like something trying to escape.

Prairie Rose appeared beside her—not walking, but there suddenly, the way people appear in dreams. "You ride like your great grandmother did," she said. "Better, even. Make her proud out there."

The starting shot cracked like lightning.

The chute door exploded open. Cassie's body knew before her mind did—this was it, this was the moment. She felt the horse's massive power beneath her, felt its muscles coiling and releasing, felt every breath of wind rushing past. Not just riding for herself anymore. She was riding for her great grandmother, whose hands had taught her these same movements, whose voice still whispered in her bones: "Ride true. Ride like you mean it."

The next morning Cassie got up and went back to the table and continued with the folder. She picked up where she left off:

Prairie Rose was the focus.

At first Johnny joked about it.

“Look at you,” he’d say, slapping a poster on the wall. “Big star.”

But the jokes got sharper.

“They only call me when you’re busy, you notice that?”
“Funny how they don’t want a ‘real cowboy’ unless he’s standing next to you.”

He started lingering at the commissary, drinking more between takes—then between jobs. He’d come back smelling of sweat and cheap whiskey, eyes tight. Every compliment Rose got sounded like an insult in his ears. Every time a director asked Johnny to “step aside and let Rose show us how it’s done,” something in him hardened.

For Rose, it was never about the cameras. The riding felt wrong. The “broncs” were half-broke horses asked to kick a little for the lens. The “danger” was staged, rehearsed, shouted through a megaphone.

She missed the dirt of a real arena, the crack of a gate, the way a crowd roared because they’d just watched you survive, not because someone told them, “Applaud here.” Between shoots, she’d sit on the corral fence and stare past the backlot hills, imagining the long roads north, the posters for Cheyenne, the smell of real rodeo dust.

“You’re not happy,” Johnny said once, bitter. “You’ve got everything, and you’re still not happy.”

“I’ve got cameras,” she answered. “That’s not the same thing.”

Cassie got up to refill her cup with more coffee and a good stretch. She stepped outside on the back porch and stared off in the distant woods. “This never gets old.” She said pretty much to herself. Lingering there a little longer than she probably should have. She didn’t want to go back. She was already beginning to beleive that Johnny was to blame.

The more the studio leaned on Rose, the more they leaned away from Johnny. A stunt he thought was his went to a younger rider. A bit part they’d hinted at vanished. When he complained, they reminded him—politely—that it was Prairie Rose the public wanted. He was “lucky to be along for the ride.”

The fights at home got meaner.

“This was supposed to be about us!” He screamed. “Not about you!”

“I didn’t want this Johnny. I came here only becasue you convinced me. If I had my way we would be in Burns on the ranch getting ready for the next rodeo.” she shot back.

One night, after a day of retakes where the director called her “darling” and called Johnny “you, over there,” Johnny finally said what had been slithering around the edges for months:

“If it wasn’t for you, they’d see what I can do.”

Rose stared at him. “If it wasn’t for me, you’d still be breaking your fool neck in little back-alley shows for five dollars and a bottle.” her come back was piercing. She didn’t mean it. She just wanted to hurt him like he had been hurting her.

Silence. Then a slammed door.

Chapter 4

The Arizona folder emptied. Nothing more there.

The next folder bore the name: Charles Coleman.

Cassie opened it. The first photograph stopped her—a man with a weathered face, white shirt, overalls. The date on the back: 1929. He wasn't smiling. Neither was she—just content. Resigned. An invoice followed: feed, lumber, Ann Coleman's name. Rawlins lumber yard.

Then a page, yellowed, creased. A diary entry.

June 3, 1931

I foaled the horse today. It wasn't pleasant but the colt is a beauty. When he grows up, he will make someone a good rider. I just wish it was me. I miss the rodeo days. I was so dumb to marry Johnny. I regret all those years I spent. With tears forming in my eyes, I miss my true love, Tommy Henderson. He was taken from me far too quickly. Charles is a good man. He is good to me. He loves me, but I just can't give him my heart. It has been taken twice and destroyed both times. There's just not any of it left to give.

The entry ended.

Cassie searched the folder. Nothing else. No more diary pages. No more entries.

She sat holding that single sheet of paper. This piece of Ann—raw, unfiltered—told her more than every other document combined. Her great-grandmother's heartbreak lived in these lines. A woman caught between two men she'd loved and lost, marrying a third man who deserved better than the shell of a wife he received. A woman trading her freedom—and her heart—for security.

Cassie understood now. This was why Ann had taught her to ride. Not because she still dreamed of the rodeo days herself. But because she wanted her great-granddaughter to have the one thing she never did: choice.

Cassie knew that the truth would not be found within these documents. Ann’s death was a surprise. I don’t believe that she saw it coming. I am going to have to do a deep dive to find the answer to the questions.

Cassie logged in and searched Johnny Judd 1929.

Dozens of articles pulled up—Johnny and Prairie Rose together, over and over. She scrolled until one headline stopped her: Prairie Rose Rides into the Sunset Without Johnny.

She clicked it. The article confirmed what she needed: February 25, 1929. Amicable divorce. Ann had gone back to Wyoming. Johnny had headed to California for ranch work in the Central Valley. But then—1931: Montana. Bessemer Ranch near Bozeman.

"Bessemer Ranch," Cassie murmured, typing the name.

Six pages of results appeared. Nothing useful. She tried again: Bessemer Ranch 1930s.

This time, a headline caught her eye: Harry Morgan and the Ranch.

She clicked. Harry Morgan—wealthy oilman from Wyoming—had purchased the old Grizzly Ranch in Bozeman and renamed it Bessemer Ranch. In an interview, he explained the name choice: it referenced the area near Casper, Wyoming, where he'd made his fortune. The ranch was performing well. He planned to keep the existing staff intact.

"If it ain't broke, don't break it," the article quoted him as saying, grinning.

Cassie stared at those words. Harry Morgan. Wyoming oilman. Bessemer Ranch.

The pieces weren't quite connecting yet—but something felt close.

Johnny rode into Bozeman with everything he owned strapped to his back and his horse—which was nothing, really. Just a bedroll, a change of clothes, and the smell of California dust. He'd heard Grizzly Ranch had a decent reputation before Morgan bought it. New owner promised nothing would change. That's what they always said.

A man in a worn Stetson was waiting at the main house—the foreman, Marsten, from the look of him.

"Need work?" the foreman asked, already measuring Johnny with his eyes.

"Been twenty years with horses and cattle," Johnny said, keeping his voice level. "I'm from around here. Know the country."

"Where you been the last few years?"

"California. Arizona before that." Johnny's jaw tightened. "Left that life. Wife and all of it. Figured Montana might be... different."

Marsten nodded slow. He didn't ask more. Men who showed up at ranches didn't usually have stories worth telling. "Winter's hard here. Summer's harder. Men either stick or they break. You look like you might stick."

He pointed west. "Bunkhouse over there. Find an empty bed. Come back once you're settled—Mr. Morgan likes to meet the help."

The bunkhouse smelled like sweat, tobacco, and things best not named. Three men sat at the table used for eating and playing, and they all turned to watch Johnny like he was fresh meat. He found an empty bunk by the latrine and started throwing his gear on it.

"I wouldn't take that one if I was you," one of the men said flat, not moving.

Johnny stopped. "It's empty."

"There's a reason for that." The second man grinned, "The smell that comes out of there is enough to gag a mule." The third one laughed hard enough to scare a horse. "

Johnny stood there for a beat, processing what he just heard. He joined in the laughter as well and then picked up his bedroll and moved two bunks down. "This place is going to be alright." he said to himself.

Johnny stepped into Morgan's house and stopped cold.

The foyer alone was bigger than any bunkhouse he'd ever slept in. Crystal chandeliers hung from a ceiling that seemed to stretch into infinity. The walls were lined with oil

paintings—men on horses, mountains, wealth rendered in gilt frames. Persian rugs covered mahogany floors that gleamed like glass. Furniture he didn't have names for filled every corner.

He'd lived among movie people in Arizona—actors, producers, the kind of men who spent money like it grew on trees. This made all of that look like child's play.

“Welcome to Bessemer.” A big burly man said as he came down the stairs. Johnny wasn’t considered a big man but he was big enough that most men did not challenge him. But Mr. Morgan made him look like a child.

"Harry Morgan," he said, extending his hand.

Johnny took it. Morgan's grip was a vice—calloused, deliberate, the kind of handshake that was less greeting than dominance display. Johnny felt the pressure all the way up his arm and understood immediately: this man didn't ask questions. He didn't negotiate. He owned.

"Marsten says you're local. Know the seasons here." Morgan led them into the sunroom, all light and glass. "Most men can't hack it past spring. I need men who stay."

Johnny opened his mouth.

"Call me Harry," Morgan said before he could speak.

"Harry." Johnny's jaw tightened. "I came up here because Arizona ate me alive. My ex-wife saw to that."

Morgan studied him. "Sounds like you're still angry about it."

"Anger keeps you moving when nothing else will." Johnny met his eyes. "But yeah. I'm angry."

"Anger's a luxury." Morgan moved to the window, his silhouette sharp against the glass. "Around here, it gets you or the horse killed. Marsten will work it out of you."

"If it comes out," Johnny said quietly.

Morgan turned. There was something in his expression—not quite a smile. "It will. Men like you don't last long if they keep that kind of fire burning."

Chapter 5

As Cassie was reading article after article, she had a thought. Acting upon it she began typing away. Her hunch looked like it was payiing off. The news article read, *Prairie Rose in Rawlins.* She began to reading.

Charles and Ann were in Rawlins picking up supplies for the month. The weather was starting to turn from comfortable nights to cold. Talk around the farmers and ranchers was that we were in for a bitter winter. Charles wanted to get geared up. Out there on Green Mountain, the weather isn't forgiving. You have to be prepared or you don't make it.

As they were in the grocery store, a woman came up tot he Colemans and said, "You look so familiar. What is your name?"

"Ann Coleman." She said with a smile on her face reaching out her hand to meet the stranger.

"Nice to meet you too." she said and then went back to her business. Another lady that noticed the exchange exclaimed, "You're Prairie Rose Henderson. The world's greatest lady bronc rider." With that the entire store stopped and people started coming over to see what was going on.

When Ann shared that she was, a reporter for the Rawlins Reporter was in the store and began to ask questions. They went back and forth for about fifteen minutes and then the reporter asked if she could print it. Ann relinquished that it would be okay.

As Cassie finished the article she wondered who all read or heard about this interaction in Rawlins.

The bunkhouse was quiet except for the scrape of forks and the rustle of newsprint. Tucker had the Bozeman Bugle spread across the table, scanning the daily headlines while he ate.

Johnny got up to refill his coffee. On the way back, he stopped cold.

A photograph. A woman on a horse, flag held high, arena lights behind her. Prairie Rose Rides Into the Sunset.

"I don't like men staring at me," Tucker said, reaching for the paper.

"Let me see that." Johnny's voice was flat.

Tucker opened it back up. There she was—Ann, the life he'd tried to leave behind in California.

"She was a looker," Tucker said, grinning. "Real beauty."

"She was my wife."

Tucker's grin widened. "There ain’t no way a worn-out saddle bum like you was married to something like that."

Johnny moved without thinking. The coffee mug caught Tucker across the temple—a clean hit. Tucker went down hard, stayed down. The other men were on Johnny before he could breathe, and he was swinging, connecting, tasting blood. It was only when Marsten's revolver cracked across his skull that the fight stopped—not because Johnny quit, but because his vision went black.

The doctor in Bozeman patched them up—stitches, bandages, splints for broken ribs. Neither man needed to stay.

Back at Bessemer, Morgan was waiting in his study. He didn't shout. His voice was cold, controlled.

"I told you bitterness would kill you." Morgan stood behind his desk, rifle resting against it like a casual threat. "This ranch has no room for men who can't control themselves. You're done here."

Johnny didn't argue. He knew what that tone meant.

"Get your things and get off my land. And Johnny?" Morgan smiled without warmth. "If I see you again, I'll make sure you disappear somewhere no one thinks to look."

Marsten followed Johnny to the bunkhouse, Winchester slung across his chest. Morgan came behind, rifle in hand.

The other hands watched in silence as Johnny gathered his bedroll.

"Listen up," Morgan called out. "Mr. Judd is leaving. He's finished here. And any man who sees him on this property after today has my permission to put a bullet in him.

Better yet—you bring him to the train station out back, and there's fifty dollars in it for you."

The train station. Every man in the bunkhouse knew what that meant. The back acreage. The place where things went to disappear.

Johnny understood then. He'd never been hired. He'd been selected. And now he was being erased.

Chapter 6

The article in the Bozeman Bugle read, “Tucker Edmondson, a ranch hand on the Bessemer Ranch, died from injuries he sustained in a fight that broke out in the bunk house. ‘We handled the situation. The man that was involved in Tucker’s death has been taken care of.’ Harry Morgan shared.

“Could it have been Johnny Judd?” Cassie asked the computer. “How did they take care of him?” Was he fired? Was he killed?” She searched for more information but nothing was available.

As Johnny rode down the trail, he had one thought that was burning a hole in him. Rawlins!

January 12, 1932.
Johnny rode into Rawlins under a cold, hard sky. He stabled his horse at the Ferris, rented a room, and asked the bartender where a man might find a drink. After getting directions, he headed for Murphy’s Place.

When he stepped through the door, the chatter died. Every head turned, sizing him up, unsure if trouble had just walked in. Johnny ordered a drink, then told the bartender to leave the bottle. Halfway through it, his tongue loosened.

“Any of you fellas seen Prairie Rose around?” he asked, voice sharp and slurred. “I took all her best years. She’s worn out now—useless. Don’t waste your time on that piece of trash.”

A man leaned over from a nearby table. “I seen her a couple of weeks back. Her and Charles come to town once a month for supplies. They’ve got a place up by Green Mountain.”

Johnny nodded slowly, doing the math. “So, they’ll be in town in about two weeks?”

“Roughly,” the man said.

Johnny grinned, eyes darkening. *That woman’s done taking. Now it’s my turn to take.* He pushed himself up from the table and staggered back toward the Ferris.

Out at the homestead, Charles and Ann were in the barn with Mertile, their last milking cow. The poor thing had been struggling for two weeks. Her pregnancy wasn’t going well.

“Ann, I need you to ride into Rawlins and get the vet,” Charles said wearily. “If we don’t, we’re gonna lose her.”

Ann layered up, saddled the horse, and rode through the bitter wind to Doc Smith's place. When she got there, she called out in the barn—nothing. She pounded on the door of the house, but no one answered. With snow thickening, she turned her horse toward town.

She burst through the door of the doctor's office, breathless and pale. "Ann, what's wrong?" asked Joyce, the doctor's wife.

"Mertile's in bad shape, Joyce. I stopped by Doc Smith's, but he wasn't there. Do you know where he is?"

"He's out at the Jansens' farm—Tommy's horse broke a leg, and Tommy got banged up pretty bad. Will's been out there nearly four hours. He should be back soon. Why don't you warm up over at Murphy's Place? I'll send him straight to your place when he returns."

Ann hesitated but nodded. She hated the thought of sitting warm while Charles froze, but she obeyed. It started snowing again as she rode into town. At Murphy's, she hung her coat, shook off the snow, and ordered the strongest thing they had.

The bartender poured her a shot of Wild Turkey, his eyes flicking nervously around the room—looking for Judd. If Johnny was nearby, trouble wasn't far behind.

Ann had barely been there half an hour when Joyce slipped in, breath clouding from the cold. "Ann, Doc's back. I told him about Mertile, and he's on his way to help Charles. You'd best head home."

Ann downed her drink in one go, grabbed her coat, and was back on her horse before her glass hit the table.

She didn't notice the man who rose from a corner table a moment later. Johnny followed, keeping to the shadows at a safe distance.

"I've got you now, you worthless..," he muttered under his breath.
Unable to finish his thought from the slight bucking from his horse, interrupting his glare. Still, he pressed on into the storm, keeping her in sight, unseen.

Snow fell thicker as Ann rode, flakes stinging her face like needles. The wind cut through her coat, and the horizon disappeared behind a white curtain. She leaned low over her horse's neck, urging it faster, desperate to reach Charles before it was too late.

Back at the homestead, the lantern in the barn threw long, shaky shadows across the walls. Charles knelt in the straw beside Mertile, his hands trembling with exhaustion. The cow's breathing came ragged and shallow. Every few moments, she kicked weakly, then fell still again. Charles murmured to her softly, the way a man talks to an old friend, his breath fogging in the frigid air.

Then, faint over the storm, he heard hoofbeats. Relief flickered in his chest for a moment—but something about the rhythm was wrong. Too heavy. Too slow. He stepped to the barn door and pulled it open, shielding his eyes from the snow.

No one.

Just the dark shape of the windmill creaking against the gale.

He turned back to Mertile, shaking his head, unaware that a shadow had stopped a hundred yards out, watching. Johnny reined in his horse, dismounting to lead it quietly behind the old cottonwoods near the fence line. The light from the barn flickered across his face—hard, hungry, and full of something colder than the snow falling around him.

Ann broke through the storm an hour later, exhausted but relieved to see the barn light still burning. She dismounted and hurried inside. “Charles!” she shouted. “Doc’s on his way—shouldn’t be more than a half hour!”

Charles looked up, face lined by worry but softening at the sight of her. “Good,” he said. “We might just keep her yet.”

Ann knelt beside him, stroking Mertile’s neck, speaking to her gently. The cow let out a soft groan. The two of them worked in silence for a while, keeping close to the lantern for warmth.

Just as Johnny was going to head to the barn and exact revenge, Doc road up ruining everything. He backed up and was lost in the trees and snowfall.

Charles turned, startled, as the lamplight caught a figure brushing snow from his shoulders.
“Evening, Charles,” Doc Smith called, his breath clouding the air.
“Joyce told me you were in a bad way. Let’s have a look at her.”

Ann let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. “Thank God you made it, Will. I was afraid the storm would keep you.”

The old vet gave a half smile, eyes already scanning the scene. “Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve been snowed into a barn. Let’s see what’s troubling your girl.”

He crouched beside Mertile, running a steady hand along her flank. The cow groaned softly, hooves twitching in the straw. Doc pressed his ear to her side, listening, then straightened with a sigh.

“She’s fighting, but that calf’s turned wrong. If we’re going to save her, we’ll need to work fast.”

Charles fetched warm water while Ann held the lantern higher. The vet rolled up his sleeves, his hands steady even as the wind moaned at the walls. He talked while he

worked—low, calm instructions keeping Charles moving and Ann's hands from trembling.

"Easy now... she's still strong. That's it, girl."

Minutes dragged into an hour. Then came a sound so small it barely pierced the storm outside—a weak, wet cry.

Doc leaned back with a tired grin. "There she is."

Ann dropped to her knees beside the calf, rubbing its slick hide with a feed sack. The little thing gave another feeble bawl, blinking at the light. The mother let out a long, low sigh, her breathing still shallow but steady.

"She's not out of the woods," Doc said, wiping his hands, "but she'll live. Keep her warm, give her water in the morning. You two did right calling me when you did."

Ann smiled through tears, leaning into Charles's side. "Couldn't have done it without you, Will."

Doc shook his head. "You did the hard part. I just steered the ship."

The wind had settled to a steady moan by the time Doc Smith finished packing his things. Mertile lay quietly in the straw, the calf curled against her side. Ann had started a pot of coffee on the small stove near the door while Charles and Doc spoke in low tones.

"She's stable for now," Will said, tightening the strap on his satchel. "But I didn't realize she'd need calcium supplement or the penicillin. I've still got some back in town."

Charles frowned. "Storm's bad, but I can make the trip with you."

Ann turned sharply. "Charles, no—you've been up near twenty hours. Let the doc go, I'll tend them here."

Doc raised a hand. "He's right to come along. I'll need help hauling the supplies—can't risk the horse alone in this wind. We'll take the sled; be there and back before midnight."

Ann hesitated, worry fighting reason, then finally nodded. "Be careful. Both of you."

Charles squeezed her shoulder, catching her eyes. "Keep the light burning, Annie. We'll be back soon."

They vanished into the whiteout, the barn door closing behind them with a hollow thud.

Ann busied herself inside, moving between the stove, the stalls, and the newborn calf. The house sat dark against the fields, its windows glowing faintly in the storm. The blizzard had eased, but the wind carried strange sounds—branches snapping, something bumping against the siding.

She wrapped her shawl tighter and listened.

Another thump. Then a scraping sound near the chicken coop.

Ann frowned, grabbing the old revolver that hung beside the door. “Damn coyotes,” she muttered. She stepped outside, lantern raised high, the warm light spilling over snowdrifts and empty ground.

The noise came again, farther out near the pump shed. She trudged through the snow, the wind tugging at her skirt. “Git! I ain’t losing my hens tonight!”

When she reached the shed, she found the door swinging gently in the gust. A loose hinge. Nothing more. She exhaled, relief mixing with irritation. But then—a flicker of movement in the trees.

“Charles?” she called cautiously. “That you?”

No answer. Only the rhythm of hoofbeats, muffled by distance but steady—coming closer, then stopping.

The lantern flame trembled.

“Who’s there?”

She continued to be drawn further away from the house. When she was just about to give up and head back the noise came again. She thought to herself, “I am this far, I am dedicated. Something is dying tonight.”

As she started into the trees she kept hearing the noise. At that moment she knew it wasn’t an animal it was a someone.

“I know you are out there. You might as well stop hiding and show yourself.”

A voice drifted out of the dark. Cool. Familiar.

“Evening, Prairie Rose.”

She spun, heart lurching. Johnny stepped out from the shadows, snow crusted on his hat brim, eyes glinting under the pale light.

“You didn’t think I’d let you slip this easy, did you?”

Ann backed away, voice shaking. “Johnny… I don’t want no trouble. Just turn around and ride off; nobody needs to know you were here.”

But he only smiled, bitter and joyless. “You already took everything I had. Now I’ll take what’s left of yours.”

The lantern’s flame guttered as the wind rose again, carrying a faint cry over the snow—then silence returned to the prairie.

Epilogue

The Ferris lobby was warmer than Cassie expected, but the old walls still carried a draft that smelled faintly of dust and lemon oil. The place was a museum now—glass cases, framed photographs, a faded hotel sign with gold lettering that once meant importance in a town like Rawlins.

The archivist, a gray-haired woman named Marla, set a long, narrow ledger on the table in front of her. “This one’s from ‘31 to ‘33,” she said. “Guests, payments, notes. You said you were looking for January ‘32?”

Cassie nodded, fingers already tracing the worn leather edge. “Yeah. Around the twelfth, if you have it.”

Marla left her with a soft, practiced smile. “I’ll be in the office if you need anything. Just don’t sneeze on it.”

Cassie forced a brief laugh, then opened the ledger. The pages crackled softly, the ink browned with age. Line after line of careful script: cattle buyers, traveling salesmen, railroad men. The dates marched across the top—January 10, 11, 12. Her pulse quickened.

She slowed down when she reached the twelfth.

Halfway down the page, she saw it.

J. Judd – Cheyenne.

The neat hand of the clerk had underlined the name, and in the margin someone had scrawled, Hangs at Murphy’s. Loud mouth.

Cassie exhaled through her nose, a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. The date column beside the name read: Jan 12, 1932. The same date written in faded pencil inside her great-grandfather Charles’s journal back in her backpack: *“Ann rode into town in the storm. She never came back.”*

She pulled the journal out, careful not to touch the ledger with it, and opened to the brittle page she had practically memorized.

The man she feared is here. Said his name was Johnny. I don’t trust the law to handle it. Lord, keep us from harm.

Until last week, that was all she had—fear and a first name.

She swallowed, closed the journal, and took a breath that felt too loud in the quiet room.

“Find something?”

Marla’s voice floated in from the doorway.

Cassie looked up. “Can I see any law records from that week? Sheriff logs, notes… anything?”

Marla tilted her head, thinking. “We don’t keep those here, but I’ve got photocopies from the county. Some of the originals are at the state archives in Cheyenne.” She disappeared again and returned with a thin manila folder, its corners curled.

Cassie opened it and scanned the pages—incident reports, handwritten notes, names she didn’t recognize. Then, near the back, she saw a brief entry:

January 14, 1932 – Inquiry into deceased female at homestead near Green Mountain. Weather conditions severe. Possible exposure. Questioned drifter, John ‘Johnny’ Judd, seen in town asking after woman called “Prairie Rose” at Murphy’s. No witnesses. Released.

The words “Prairie Rose” were underlined twice.

Cassie’s throat tightened. Prairie Rose. The nickname Charles had written only once, as if it hurt to look at it on the page. The name her grandmother had whispered when she was half asleep and remembering a mother she barely knew.

Her hand shook as she traced the air above the report, not quite touching it.

“Are you all right?” Marla asked softly.

Cassie nodded, but it took her a moment to find her voice. “My great-grandmother… her name was Ann. They said she got lost in a storm up by Green Mountain. No one ever mentioned a man.”

Marla pulled out the chair across from her and sat down without speaking.

Cassie opened Charles’s journal again, setting it between the ledger and the sheriff’s note. Ink from different lives, on different days, now facing each other.

Charles’s cramped letters: *If anything happens, it’s Johnny. He said he’d find her, even out here.*

The hotel ledger: J. Judd – Cheyenne – Jan 12.

The sheriff’s report: Questioned drifter, John “Johnny” Judd… asking after woman called “Prairie Rose.”

It lined up so neatly it made her dizzy.

She let out a long, uneven breath. “He was here,” she whispered. “He followed her. They even questioned him. And then…” She gestured weakly at the report. “They called it exposure and let him ride away.”

Silence settled between them, heavy but not empty.

Marla folded her hands. “Sometimes things fall through the cracks, especially back then. Women, homesteads, bad weather—it was easier to blame the storm.”

Cassie stared at the pages until the ink blurred. All the years of her family not knowing, all the vague stories about a woman swallowed by snow. It hadn’t just been the storm. It had been a man with a name and a room at the Ferris and a night at Murphy’s.

She closed the folder gently, then the ledger, then finally the journal.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice steadier now. “I think… I think this is what I came for.”

Marla nodded. “You found her story.”

Cassie slipped the journal back into her bag, fingers resting on it a moment longer than necessary. She didn’t have an arrest record or a conviction, but she had a date, a name, and a trail of ink that all pointed the same direction. Johnny Judd had been in Rawlins when Ann died. He had asked for her by the name only people who truly knew her used. And then Ann was gone.

For the first time, the mystery felt less like a hole and more like a wound with edges she could finally see. It still hurt, but at least now it had a shape, a cause, and a man to lay it on.

As she stepped out of the old hotel into the sharp Wyoming air, Cassie looked up at the winter sky over Rawlins and whispered, “They know now, Ann. We know.”

This is a work of fiction.

Though the characters and specific events are invented, some locations and details were inspired by historical sources on Rawlins, Wyoming, including articles on the Ferris Hotel/Ferris Mansion, historic hotel culture, and the preservation of Wyoming newspapers and archives.

The Sad Saga of Prairie Rose

When December winds bluster and howl across the Green Mountains of south central Wyoming, they sometimes bring more than blizzards and bone-chilling, cold, several sheep herders, cowboys, and trappers have heard in the moaning gales the plaintive cries of a woman calling, “Help! Help! Oh, God, please help me!”

Ann Robbins was born to a Wyoming ranching couple in the mid 1870s, and from earliest childhood it was clear that she was something special. The strawberry-blonde tomboy’s major ambition was to be a cowgirl, and while she was still a teenager, she learned to break her own horses and those of the local ranchers.

When she was old enough to leave home, she joined the CB Irwin Wild West Show to ride relay races with Irwin’s daughters, but in just a short time, she became one of the top lady bronc riders in the country. She traveled with the troupe for several years before she met and married a cowboy named Henderson, who gave her the stage name that she was to use for the rest of her professional life.

The rodeo circuit meant everything to “Prairie Rose Henderson,” whose daring stunts of horsemanship, combined with her exuberance and winning smile, never failed to make her an instant crowd-pleaser. One of her biggest fans was Queen Mary of England, who enjoyed Prairie Rose’s act during a command performance of the Tex Austin Rodeo in 1924.

All was not so happy in her personal life, however. Her husband either died or they were divorced and her next marriage was to Johnny Judd, a great trick roper. Prairie Rose continued to accumulate trophies and prizes for her riding, and in 1917, the Union Pacific Railroad presented her with a gold and silver belt buckle for winning the Ladies’ Bronc Riding Championship in Cheyenne.

The late 1920s were the heyday of silent movies, and Johnny Judd and Prairie Rose Henderson moved to Tucson, Arizona, to make westerns. But Prairie Rose tired of that life after a few years, so she returned to Wyoming to make her home, still competing in every major rodeo in the world, including those in Boston and in New York's Madison Square Garden, where she won in her events.

Her third and final husband was a rancher named Chares Coleman, whom she met around 1929. The couple homesteaded in a cabin on Green Mountain some fifty miles northwest of Rawlins and little more is known about them until the unusually severe winter of 1932.

One treacherously cold December day when Charles had gone to Rawlins, fifty-seven-year-old Prairie Rose ventured outdoors into a blizzard, probably to check on the animals. She never returned.

Callers at the homestead were the first to discover that something was wrong, when they found the Coleman's dogs locked up in the shed as if their mistress had intended to come back soon. An immediate search of the vicinity was organized, and although the would-be rescuers covered much of th eGreen Mountain, they were unable to find even a single clue to the former rodeo champion's disappearance.

Not until six and half years later, in the summer of 1939, was the mystery solved. According to a story dated July 25 in the Rawlins Republican-Bulletin a sheep herder named A. Martinez stumbled upon a skeleton in a comparatively open area of Green Mountain, at the foot of a pine tree in a section partially grown over by sagebrush, in the southern part of Fremont County." All that remained were a few strands of strawberry-blonde hair, some tattered rags that still clung to the bones, and a portion of knotted rope.

Charles Coleman identified the overalls and overshoes found on the body as his wife's, and Coroner M.E. Pickett and Undersheriff Frank Lemoine quickly deduced that she had lost her way and frozen to death in the blizzard, since there was no evidence and very little possibility of foul play. The length of rope found near the body was tied to a square knot, and Charlels Coleman identified it as one that he had made for the purpose of catching horses to saddle and ride. According to a July 26 story in the Rawlin Republican-Bulletin, Coleman theorized that Prairie Rose had gone out to rope a horse and then became disoriented by the blinding snow. Evidence that he was correct is borne out by the fact that although she was familiar with the area, she had wandered to the opposite side of the mountain, two and a half miles from her own cabin.

An ironic footnote to Prairie Rose's story is that on the day her skeleton was found, her husband was among a crew of firefighters putting out a small blaze only a quarter of a mile from where she lay. The Republican-Bulletin also points out the "peculiar twist of fate" in the fact that the body was found in the one small area threatened by the fire, instead of in the "thousands and

thousands” of acres where she could have been lost. And the fire, if it had not been controlled, would surely have “erased all trace of the missing woman.”

According to western writer and former rodeo performer Don Bell, quite a few people have heard Prairie Rose calling for help on stormy nights, “I didn’t know whether what they were telling me was fact or fiction.” Don explained, “but I’ve heard two or three cowboys and sheep herders tell me about the time they heard Prairie Rose’s lonesome wailing during blizzards. The last report I heard was as late as the 1960s. Her echo probably still haunts the mountains.”

Fiery-spirited, independent Prairie Rose Henderson was a woman way ahead of her time. She could rope and ride far better than most men, and her skill at subduing bucking broncs was legendary. It would seem that the only physical challenge she ever failed to meet was the one that took her life.

Yes, that works beautifully for historical fiction and fits both theme and era. A great-granddaughter in the 2020s gives you a natural bridge between Prairie Rose’s world and a modern investigation.

Why a great-granddaughter works

A great-granddaughter is the right generational distance for the 2020s if Ann (Prairie Rose) lived in the early 1900s. She can plausibly grow up hearing half-remembered family stories, sanitized myths, or conflicting versions of what “really” happened to Prairie Rose. Those family legends can clash with the official account that Ann died in a blizzard, giving your protagonist a personal reason to question the record.

Strong character and premise

The great-granddaughter could:

- Be a modern rodeo rider, trick rider, or barrel racer trying to “carry on the Henderson name,” only to realize how little she truly knows about Ann.
- Discover old photos, letters, or newspaper clippings that hint at Johnny Judd’s threats and other dangers that never made it into public histories.

- Feel torn between her modern life (job, school, relationships) and the pull of this investigation into her ancestor's fate.

Her arc then becomes both external (solving the mystery) and internal (deciding what it really means to follow in Prairie Rose's footsteps).

How the truth can unfold

Some effective beats for her investigation:

- She finds a forgotten trunk, saddle, costume piece, or diary fragment in a family attic or barn that contradicts the "simple blizzard" story.
- Rodeo archives, small-town museums, and local newspapers reveal gaps: dates that don't line up, last sightings in different places, hints that someone was looking for her or threatening her.
- Older relatives or descendants of Johnny Judd's family add more conflicting accounts, forcing her to decide whom to believe.

As she uncovers the truth, she can also confront modern echoes of the same issues Ann faced—control, reputation, risk, and what it costs a woman to live boldly—so that solving the mystery changes how she rides, loves, and lives today.